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AUTHOR Headlam, Alis L.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether cultural relevancy was achieved in the development of stories for the "Doctor Bird Readers" by the Jamaican government for children in grades four through six by using Jamaican authors and artists. Quantitative questionnaires were used to survey the schools, and participant observations and informal interviews during the ethnography provided a means of gathering background knowledge of the Jamaican culture. Individual interviews (three 1-hour sessions) were conducted by grade level with four-six students of mixed abilities. Three hundred fifty-one questionnaires were completed, with results indicating that the books were used daily or frequently. Qualitative interviews revealed that 60 of the 75 stories were considered relevant by the students. The relevancy described by the children in these interviews was both personal and cultural. Background knowledge and experiences that the children brought to the text, combined with their ability to predict what was happening, affected readability the most. Teachers reported that although the books were most effective with the middle reading groups, overall the books were having a positive effect on all of the students. (Twenty-eight references are attached.) (MG)

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ALIS HEADLAM

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ABSTRACT

EXAMINING CULTURAL RELEVANCY IN THE DOCTOR BIRD READERS: TEXT ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF JAMAICAN CHILDREN

Paper Presented

At the 35th Annual International Reading Association Conference in Atlanta, Georgia on May 9, 1990

The Doctor Bird Readers represents a first attempt by the Jamaican government to produce reading books for children in grades 4 - 6. The Ministry of Education sought to develop stories which were relevant to the lives of the readers by using Jamaican authors and artists.

This dissertation research uses primarily a qualitative methodology to examine whether cultural relevancy was achieved. An important element of the research describes the researcher's immersion in the Jamaican culture before beginning interviews with authors, artists, students, and teachers.

A quantitative questionnaire combined with interview data collected during a pilot study shows that the books were regarded as culturally relevant by both students and teachers. This data confirms a study conducted by the Ministry of Education prior to island-wide distribution of the books.

In the study information gathered during interviews with authors and artists examines why they chose certain stories or illustrations. Interviews with children and

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teachers indicate elements of the stories, illustrations and language that they considered relevant.

The study concludes that the books achieved a high degree of relevancy. Children are able to find themselves, and other familiar persons, events and settings in the stories, the illustrations and the language. This research supports the notion that the content of the text, not the words themselves, is what makes the text relevant to children.

The books have had a significant impact on reading education in Jamaica. For the first time all children in grades 4 - 6 have their own books which are given free of charge. Children read not only in their classrooms but also at home. Low and middle reading groups are having greater success with reading than with previous books. The project is considered a success by the Ministry of Education and continues to be funded today.

Paper Presented at 35th Annual International Reading Association Conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

EXAMINING CULTURAL RELEVANCY IN THE DOCTOR BIRD READERS: TEXT ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF JAMAICAN CHILDREN

BY Alis Headlam

Introduction:

In the summer of 1979 I was visiting Negril, Jamaica for one month. I became interested in the son of one of my new friends. The boy Johnny, said his father, was in the third grade, but couldn't read. The father asked me to help Johnny. We met daily outside the father's shop, sitting on a large fallen tree trunk in the shade of a spreading mango tree. Johnny brought his class reader to me and I discovered to my surprise that it was an English text. We began reading stories, but I found out that Johnny had little knowledge of phonics. My instruction began to focus on introducing sounds. Almost as soon as we started we came across a story about a little boy whose dog had come into the house with mud on him and had gotten dirt on the carpet. Johnny didn't know the word `carpet'. I helped Johnny sound it out, `C-A-R-P-E-T'. We didn't get anywhere. So I then broke it into syllables, `car' and `pet', but this made no sense to Johnny either. I realized that the problem was not sounding out the word or recognition of syllables, but rather one of cultural unfamiliarity. In the rural community where Johnny lived houses did not have carpets. I tried calling it a `rug' and still Johnny

did not know my word. To Johnny, the floor covering that was familiar was called a 'mat'. When I introduced the word, 'mat' Johnny could go on with the story.

In April of 1981 I attended the International Reading Association conference in new Orleans. One of the presentations was about a reading series being prepared for use in grades 4 - 6 in the Jamaican public schools. The series was named The Doctor Bird Readers after the national bird of Jamaica because of its beauty, speed and fluency of movement. The purpose of the series was to provide reading materials which were locally relevant. The book project was a cooperative venture between the Ministry of Education in Jamaica and Organization of American States. (Forrester, undated report)

Because of my experience with Johnny and a new interest in Whole Language philosophy, I was very excited about the book project. I decided to find a way to support the project. I thought I could do this best by examining the relevance of the books to Jamaican children.

Historical Overview of the Research:

From 1981 to 1984 several trips were made to Jamaica to establish a working relationship with the Ministry of Education. In October 1982 I received permission from the Ministry of Education to begin the research, but it wasn't until December 1983 that I arrived with my plans to begin my own cultural immersion. I spent the first year working as a volunteer in a

junior-secondary school in order to learn the language and customs of the Jamaican people. During this time I wrote an ethnography of my own experiences as I learned to adapt to the culture. In August 1984 I was granted an O.A.S. (Organization of American States) fellowship to conduct the research.

During the Fall of 1984 I sent out a questionnaire to the principals of 700 primary and all age schools at the request of Mrs. Olive Forrest, Head of the Core Curriculum Unit at the Ministry of Education. In the Spring of 1985 I began visiting schools to select sites for the study. Twenty-four schools were visited. Interviews were conducted with principals, and classes were observed in most cases. I selected four schools, one for a pilot study and three for the actual study. Schools were selected on the basis of access, acceptance of me as a researcher and teacher/student relationships. I was particularly interested in finding schools where teacher/student relationships were not based on the threat of physical punishment.

In May 1985 a pilot study was conducted in order to test out my questions and my ability to communicate effectively with the children. This was an important step because of the qualitative nature of the study. In late Fall of 1985 interviews with authors and artists were begun. They continued into the Spring of 1986. The interviews with children in three chosen schools occurred also in the Spring. I had delayed these interviews because it was necessary for the children to have had some experience with the stories before I could ask them to talk about them. Interviews

with teachers occurred at each site also.

Methodology for the research:

There were three basic methods of gathering data for this study. Participant observation and informal interviews during my ethnography provided me with a means of gathering background knowledge of the Jamaican culture. A quantitative questionnaire was used to survey the schools. Principals were asked to respond to questions about the availability and use of the texts. The focus of the main body of research was qualitative interviewing. This methodology was selected for several reasons. It was my intention to find out what the youngsters thought in their own words of the texts. It was important that my own cultural bias be eliminated to the greatest extent that it could. Interviews were tape recorded and children's responses to questions about the text were kept in tact. (Tell me about a character that looked like you. Tell me about a character that reminds you of someone you know.) Qualitative interviewing offered the greatest opportunity for the youngsters themselves to lead the discussion.

The interviews were conducted over several sessions. Interviews with the teachers, authors and artists helped develop a complete picture of the production process and methods of instruction. (However, due to the time constraints of this presentation they will not be discussed in this paper.)

Two weeks were taken at each school to introduce myself to the students and staff. It took an additional two to three weeks

to conduct interviews. Selection of students was achieved by asking teachers to recommend readers from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds in each grade 4 - 6 at each reading level: low, middle and high. The number of boys and girls from the three schools was approximately the same. Children represented mixed heritage groups including African, Chinese, Canadian, and East Indian which were identified by teachers. No official records of ethnic or economic grouping were available.

Interviews were conducted by grade level with 4 - 6 students of mixed abilities. Three sessions occurred for one hour each. Initial individualized interviews allowed me to introduce myself, the project, and the use of a tape recorder to each child.

Results of this study:

Ethnography

The written ethnography clearly shows the tension I experienced between going native and maintaining an objective distance. At first objectivity was fairly easy to maintain as I examined social class differences and language differences. I experienced difficulties with diet, with the political mood of the country and frequent power and water lock offs. It made working as a professional more of a challenge, but I enjoyed learning each day. This stage gave way to one of sustained impressions which included those aspects of life in Jamaica that affected my life in a very personal way. I experienced cross-cultural differences and discovered that I could not live in the

same style as the local people. Social and physical isolation led me to move from rural areas to Montego Bay and finally to Kingston. My education sometimes was a barrier between me and the local women. A woman living alone was not always understood or accepted. I longed for the comforts and luxuries of my North American culture, many of which were not available or were beyond my economic means. Finally, I experienced the difficulties and joys that everyone experienced in living in Jamaica at this time. The rides on the train gave me a great deal of pleasure as it did the other passengers. When it rained I shared the same situation and conditions as anyone else. At times like this I felt more native than anything else.

Questionnaire

Almost one-half of the questionnaires were returned (327 by mail and 24 completed during visits to schools). This was considered a success by Mrs. Olive Forrester of the Ministry of Education.

General information reported on the questionnaire showed that 49% of the schools have classes with a ratio of 40 or more students to 1 teacher; and 44% with a ratio of 40 or less students to 1 teacher.

The books were used daily or frequently. (The term frequently was not further defined.) 85% of the returned questionnaires indicated that all teachers in grade 4 - 6 used the books; 97% said that they were used as main texts.

Questions about the quality of the books showed that 28% of the schools responded spontaneously that the books were culturally relevant to the children. These responses indicated that teachers and principals felt the books reflected a positive image of the culture, language and people of Jamaica.

Conclusions drawn from this questionnaire showed that the original question posed, 'Were the books culturally relevant?' was not longer the issue for this research. The focus changed to how they were relevant. 'What aspects of the content, language and illustrations were relevant to the readers and why?'

Pilot Study

The pilot study confirmed findings of earlier research conducted by the Ministry of Education during the preparation of the books. Children found the books interesting and enjoyable. They valued the information contained in the books and they liked the stories because the content was familiar. Children valued information contained in the books.

Qualitative interviews with children

Sixty of the seventy-five stories were considered relevant by the students. They were about Jamaica, about themselves, about someone they knew or a familiar place. One student said that a story was relevant because the girl in it had to carry water from a long ways. "In country like Portland (one of the 14 parishes of

Jamaica) and other country you have to do that." Characters that were shy, disobedient, sad, or angry when they didn't get their own way were like the student readers. Students also found characters who did the types of things they like to do or would like to do: going to parties, chasing crooks, writing letters, playing football and helping out other people were mentioned. One student identified with a character because "my father is a farmer too and he plant a lot of vegetables." Familiar scenes included Ocho Rios and Kingston. In one story a Landrover is overtaking another car quite fast. A student commented, "You can know that this is a Jamaican car because you can see the Black man driving it and he's driving like he's mad and trying to overtake them."

The stories contained familiar language. For example, one character confronts her aunt who has just opened a letter. The aunt's reply is, "Don't forget yourself, girl. I am your aunt. I can open your letter if I want to. I opened it to see if your mother sent any money. Well, she has sent some, but it is not enough." The student thought this sounded Jamaican because of its tone, but also because of its reference to money. Some images reflected Jamaica. "The fife-man grinned down at the boy. He had clean white teeth that sparkled against his dark face."

These findings further supported the pilot studies conducted by the Ministry of Education and myself. The stories were liked for their morals and the information that they contained. They were relevant to the children in many ways and they were not

difficult to read.

One of the findings that was not predicted was that the relevancy described by children in these interviews was both personal and cultural. In some cases feelings or relationships common to children everywhere made the books relevant to the children. In other cases it was the events, the people, the language or the places that reflected universal life experiences that made the books relevant.

Children were able to discriminate between what was relevant and what was not. They had no trouble identifying African, Chinese, East Indian or European characters. Stories were considered foreign because of a difference in clothes, events or landscape. There were no cases where students could not justify their answers. Being foreign did not always mean that the story or character was not relevant to the child. For example, one student found the American Indian story relevant because he had seen cowboy movies on television.

Another result that surprised me was that the children had little or no critical skills for the illustrations. They liked a picture because they liked the story. When they did not like what was happening in the story or the character was not liked the picture was considered bad. A few comments focused on the poor printing of the books.

The most significant result that was unexpected was the confirmation of studies by Sims (1972) and Goodman (1978) that language was not a major consideration for relevancy. The books

were written in a Standardized Jamaican English. There were few instances of dialect in the text. Children were not bothered by this fact. In fact, one child said that he thought the language should be more formal. The use of dialect appeared to effect pleasure more than readability. It was the background knowledge and experiences that the children brought to the text, combined with their ability to predict what was happening that affected readability the most.

Other results

The teachers reported that the books were most effective with the middle reading groups. The top groups were not challenged enough and some of the language was too difficult for the low readers. However, overall the books were having a positive effect on all of the students.

In my own observations I noted that children had books to carry home. Some of them had books for the first time in their lives. Children reported that they read the books over and over again. Often they had read the entire series before they reached school. I see this as a very powerful and positive step towards literacy.

Implications:

The first implication reflects the most important result of this study. Books need to be relevant to the background experiences of the reader in order to be understood. That relevance can be created in many ways, but the basic feature is

that the writer starts from a perspective that the reader can understand. Allowing children to read books that are written by members of their own culture with the specific goal of cultural relevancy in mind provides the foundation necessary for children to understand that text is meaningful. Once children realize that the text they are reading pertains to themselves they can develop the skills necessary to make inferences and analogies to cross-cultural texts.

Secondly, writing text in dialect does not necessarily make a book easier to read. Students will understand standardized text if the writing pertains to cultural and personal experiences within the reader's background. The emphasis should be on including both personal and cultural experiences that children can relate to, not the language itself. Using dialect for dialogues or special effects, however, does make the reading enjoyable.

Finally, for countries where a variety of sub-cultures are present reading materials would best serve the population if they reflect the different cultures. In this case the use of children's literature written by members of the sub-cultures may be the most effective answer.

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